

## A STRAWMAN CALLED “PSI”—OR: WHAT IS PROFESSOR BUNGE AFRAID OF?\*

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### GENERAL REMARKS

We must confess that we had to overcome feelings of a deep-seated resistance to comment on Professor Bunge's fantasies on what parapsychology is about. We need no psychic powers, of course, to prophesie that he will not at all be impressed by our following arguments; we hope, however, that the casual reader might become interested in paying a closer look at this subject than Bunge is obviously ready to do.

Discussions about the scientific status of parapsychology are as old as the German term “Parapsychologie” itself (Dessoir, 1889), and what is so surprising to us is the fact that there is not one single argument used by Bunge which has not been extensively discussed in the relevant literature for decades (for recent reviews see Bauer, 1984, or Child, 1987). Apparently, Bunge is unaware of the history of these controversies. This fact is also illustrated by his highly biased selection of references with regard to scientific parapsychology. It is hardly understandable that he seems to rely completely and uncritically on Alcock's one-sided evaluation of parapsychology (Alcock, 1981, 1983, 1987) without even mentioning the detailed rebuttals by Palmer (1983a, 1983b) or Palmer and Rao (1987). Professor Bunge, who apparently has not even done his elementary homework, parades as a “guardian of science”!

### “YOUR PSI IS NOT MY PSI”: DEMARCATION PROBLEMS IN SCIENTIFIC PARAPSYCHOLOGY

It is a commonplace view discussed extensively in every introductory textbook on scientific parapsychology (e.g. Edge, Morris, Palmer, & Rush, 1986; Irwin, 1989) that the field needs some demarcation lines between a scientific approach and the usual popular stuff published in, say, *FATE*-magazine or CSICOP's *Skeptical Inquirer*. Of course, fads and fallacies can be found in every field. This

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does not, however, harm the credibility of established sciences because there are thousands of well-funded active researchers and institutions that need not care about such fringe claims. In parapsychology, however, the sociological situation is entirely different: There is only a handful of academic institutions, and the few professionals in the field are out-numbered by thousands of charlatans and crackpots who make fantastic claims in the name of parapsychology. So, the "bad image" of parapsychology, based on ignorance or prejudice, belongs to the well-known reception problems of an "unorthodox" science (Stevenson, 1988).

For this reason it is very easy for Bunge to create a straw-man called "psi" and to kill the poor creature like a voodoo-sorcerer kills the puppet. For him, it is all the same: "Ghosts, reincarnation, telepathy, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, dowsing, astral influences, magic, witchcraft, UFO-abductions, graphology, psychic surgery, homeopathy, psychoanalysis, and the like" (p. 131). Even a cursory look into the serious parapsychological literature (Krippner, 1977, 1978, 1981, 1984, 1987; Wolman, 1986) should be sufficient to show that parapsychological terms, for example "extrasensory perception" (ESP) and "psychokinesis" (PK), are provisional classifications of spontaneous reports or experimental results which do not include any metaphysical assumptions regarding "disembodied souls" or "communication with the dead". Hence, what is Professor Bunge afraid of?

Of course, magical thinking and extraordinary reports are as old as mankind; parapsychology, on the other hand, has succeeded in filtering out a few persistent and well documented anomalies which seem to be worth a scientific investigation. In our opinion, it is extremely unfair to put all these things together in one melting pot called "parapsychology." Scientists in the field of parapsychology do the same as their colleagues in other fields: They are after laws and explanations of the paranormal by applying the usual scientific methods.

#### PROFESSOR BUNGE'S KINDS OF SKEPTICISM AND SKEPTICAL PARAPSYCHOLOGY

Professor Bunge's learned distinction between systematic (or radical) and methodological (or moderate) skepticism has an old tradition in the parapsychological literature itself. A classical plea for skepticism in the latter sense can be found in Professor Sidgwick's address to the newly founded Society for Psychical Research (Sidgwick, 1882).

It goes without saying that dogmatic skepticism in science leads nowhere and we would be glad to agree with Professor Bunge at least in this point, if he only had taken his own insight seriously. He maintains that "methodological skepticism urges us to investigate, systematic skepticism blocks research" (p. 131), and, furthermore, that the serious researcher "does admit, at least until new notice, a host of data and theories. His skepticism is constructive, not just critical" (p. 146). This sounds fine. But why, Professor Bunge, do you ignore out of hand a host of challenging data and promising models in the relevant literature?

In case you have a deep-seated resistance to reading the peer-refereed

parapsychological mainstream-journals (e.g., *Journal of Parapsychology*, *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, *European Journal of Parapsychology*, *Journal of the Society for Scientific Exploration* or *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie und Grenzgebiete der Psychologie*) you just may wish to turn to a well-respected physics journal like *Foundations of Physics*. There you will find at least three recent articles dealing with fresh data and testable theories on parapsychological research (Jahn & Dunne, 1986; Radin & Nelson, 1989; Schmidt, 1982).

Bunge writes: "Skeptics judge superstition and pseudoscience in the light of scientific findings and reasoning" (pp. 132–133). True, that's exactly the business of professional parapsychologists! Bunge's dichotomy between "uncritical" parapsychologists and "critical" skeptics is another example of a misleading and dogmatic stereotype characterized by an informed observer of the psi-debate (sociologist Marcello Truzzi) in the following way: "Among both proponents and critics there are actually continua of opinion and approaches that are multidimensional and complex" (Truzzi, 1987, p. 4). Bunge reminds us not to "indulge in the luxury of repeating dogmas" (p. 132). OK—let's see.

#### BUNGE'S FIVE ARGUMENTS AGAINST PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

(i) Bunge maintains: "Almost all parapsychologists hold emphatically that they are concerned with paranormal phenomena, and that their discipline is exceptional or paranormal as well, . . . actually they seek neither laws nor explanations" (p. 134). "Their attitude is thus similar to that of the religious believer" (p. 134). Is there any shred of empirical evidence for such an extraordinary claim? Has Bunge ever conducted an empirical poll among "parapsychologists" to support it? Even a philosopher of science should be cautious enough not to generalize his personal prejudices. All available survey data among members of the "Parapsychological Association" (PA), the only existing professional organization of scientific parapsychology, clearly show an opposite tendency (Allison, 1978; McConnell & Clark, 1980).

(ii) Bunge maintains: Paranormal phenomena "are inconsistent with the *basic principles of science*" (p. 134). He is mesmerized by the extrapolation that if something like a psychokinetic effect exists, "psychics could take the place of waterfalls and fossil fuels in moving electric generators" (p. 134). Where, for heaven's sake, Bunge, did you get such wild ideas from? On the contrary: The empirical facts show a quite different picture. One of the widely discussed theoretical PK-models formulated by the physicist H. Schmidt (for example, 1984) assumes that such effects are very weak and do not violate physics in a strong way (for a detailed discussion see Lucadou, 1989).

(iii) Bunge maintains: Paranormal phenomena violate "at least one of the general (albeit, usually tacit) philosophical principles underlying scientific research" (p. 135), and he refers to the serious philosopher C. D. Broad. But there is an important difference neglected by Bunge: His colleague talks explicitly of "ostensibly paranormal phenomena" and following him it is the task of parapsychological research to find out whether they *actually* violate the "basic limiting principles" (Rao & Palmer, 1987). But in our opinion this has not been

proven until now. Furthermore, it has not been shown in parapsychology until now, granted these phenomena exist, that they behave in ways that can be described as "lawless, anomalous, or miraculous." Therefore it is not necessary for Bunge to spend sleepless nights worrying that "science as we know it would have to be thrown overboard" (p. 135). By the way, a little semantic clarification seems in order: There may exist "anomalous" phenomena which are nevertheless "lawful."

(iv) Bunge maintains: "Parapsychology borrows nothing from other sciences, . . . and it has contributed nothing to any science" (p. 135). Again, is there any shred of empirical evidence for such an extraordinary claim? Has Bunge ever risked an even quick glance into the voluminous "Proceedings" of the British and American Societies for Psychical Research? There he would have found pioneering work on stages of hypnotism, mental and motor automatisms, multiple personalities, dissociation processes, out-of-body and near-death experiences, or lucid dreams—in short: respectable subjects of current psychology (Gackenbach & LaBerge, 1988; Hilgard, 1986).

On the other hand, the methods and techniques of parapsychological research are adopted and adapted from all fields of established disciplines. Parapsychology is a very intriguing prototype of an interdisciplinary research endeavor. The poll conducted by McConnell and Clark (1980) among PA members shows that nearly all scientific disciplines are represented in the parapsychological community. Sorry, Professor Bunge, but parapsychology is indeed a component in the system of sciences and most of its practitioners are just ordinary scientists.

(v) Bunge maintains: "The analogy between the putative psi waves and gravitational waves . . . must be treated as a moderately sophisticated parlor game" (p. 135). We are glad that we can agree whole-heartedly with Professor Bunge at least in this point. To the best of our knowledge, there is no example in the serious literature of parapsychology where the term "psi waves" is used as an explicative construct. Those models which try to explain paranormal phenomena on the basis of analogous phenomena in physics are formulated explicitly and can be tested experimentally (for recent reviews see Lucadou, 1989, or Stokes, 1987).

#### A PERSONAL CONCLUSION

Contrary to our initial apprehensions, we finally found that the refutation of Bunge's "case against parapsychology" turned out to be an easy task. We could not find any cognitive dissonances between our position as active researchers in the field and Bunge's "well-established scientific theories or fertile philosophical principles" (p. 147). In pursuing parapsychological research we are not afraid of being held responsible for "a sharp decline of modern civilization" (p. 147). We are confident that after some decades of diligent research conducted by a few ingenious and scrupulous "parapsychologists" there is indeed empirical evidence for scientific anomalies that should challenge the curiosity of any open-minded and rational scientist.

Parapsychology indeed has a future as a science!

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